

This column features questions from readers submitted via the Web site. To submit a question to Small Acre Sam, visit BarnyardsandBackyards.com. If your question is featured, you will receive a free one-year subscription to *Barnyards & Backyards*!



ask Sam

question

Dear Sam,

Is the fall season a good time to plant trees? How about fertilizing trees?

– Jennifer, Cheyenne

Dear Jennifer,

Nationally, recommendations often refer to fall as the best time to plant ... but that varies depending on average winter snow cover, climate, and other factors.

In many areas of the United States, people plant as late as November and as early as March; however, in most of Wyoming, the definition of fall is different. Spring (April through June) is best for most trees here, although I have planted many trees in fall with great success, and many Wyoming communities routinely do plantings in early fall.

The best success I've seen in autumn plantings are those done no later than September 30 with container-grown trees and those that can be watered well into late fall and winter if snow cover is sparse. Since conifers maintain foliage year-round, they are more susceptible to desiccation (drying) in the winter if planted in the fall; the roots simply don't have enough time to establish well enough to provide moisture through the winter.

Balled-and-burlapped trees that have been dug in the spring and kept with their root wad in the soil at a nursery over summer do much better than those dug in fall. The key is maintaining fall and winter moisture until a good root system is established. I also highly recommend using some type of mulch around the base of the tree. This helps conserve water, reduce competition from weeds and grass, reduce soil compaction, and keep the soil temperature moderated (see tree winterization article on page 7 in this issue).

I would also never recommend planting bare root seedlings or trees in the fall – there is just too much of a chance of failure from inadequate water.

For more information about wintering watering of trees, shrubs, and perennials, see the University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service (UW CES) bulletin B-1186, *Winter Watering*, at <http://ces.uwyo.edu/PUBS/B1186.pdf>.

Fall fertilizing is generally not recommended in Wyoming. Fertilizing with nitrogen in the fall before trees have gone dormant can prolong the hardening-off process (the process of preparing a plant grown at a greenhouse or nursery for full outdoor exposure) and cause dieback of succulent new growth in the harsh winter. The best time to fertilize is after leaves have opened in spring. This is when the fertilizer uptake is greatest. I recommend a soil test (information available at http://ces.uwyo.edu/Soil_Main.asp), and take a look at UW CES bulletin B-1172, *Landscaping: Fertilizing Trees and Shrubs*, for a more in-depth discussion before applying fertilizer. You can find it on the Barnyards & Backyards (www.barnyardsandbackyards.com) Web site's "Soils & Fertilization" page under "Resources."

Also, check out "How to successfully plant a tree or shrub" in the Summer 2007 *Barnyards & Backyards* magazine, available at www.uwyo.edu/barnbackyard/info.asp?p=10292.

Best of luck!

Sam

answer